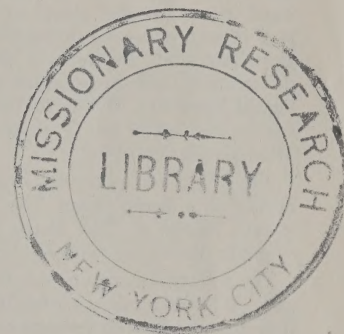




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MISSIONARY
BIOGRAPHY
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Smith

SOFT COAL PREACHER

By CONSTANCE M. HALLOCK

WHEN miners' unions are at odds with management, and both are unconcerned with the Church, that is not news. But when both work together on projects sponsored by the Church, that is news. It is the kind of news being made in West Virginia by the Rev. Richard C. Smith and the staff of the Mountaineer Mining Mission.

Son of a Standard Oil tax expert, member of a family in comfortable circumstances, a graduate of Hope College in Michigan, Dick Smith could have looked forward to a successful career in business, for he is the kind of man who can't do anything otherwise than well and thoroughly. But he was not interested. He chose the ministry, and was graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary. It was in 1941 that he finished his studies and asked the Presbyterian Board of National Missions for a hard job.

The Board had no trouble in obliging him, for he was needed in a dozen places. The job that he picked was to take charge of "The Shack," a social and religious center in the mining village of Pursglove, West Virginia.

The village belongs to the Pursglove Mining Company. It lies in a valley cut by the little stream of Scott's Run, that is oily with seepage and brown with sulphur. The railroad, crowded with freight cars, and the highway, crowded with trucks, fill the bottom of the valley, the miners' houses climb the slopes. Scant greenery does little to relieve the gray of unpainted buildings, the black and rusty-red of the mine workings.

The Shack stands in a little triangle of land with the highway in front and Scott's Run and the railway at the back. Dick Smith and Mrs. Smith, and soon young Ronnie, lived on the top floor. Ronnie took his naps to the accompaniment of freight cars clanking past, his mother fought soot and sulphur, and his father crowded a small study with books and papers and charts. Downstairs, and in all spare space, were miners' meetings, study groups, first aid classes, young people's societies, library readers, Scout meetings, Sunday school, church services, people playing games, people just hanging around to talk and see what was going on.

A hard job

All of this did not just happen. As a matter of fact, Dick Smith had two strikes against him before he started. The Shack staff had a reputation for shifting and changing. Most of its people came and went, leaving the impression that they were not really interested in Pursglove. In the mines, management blamed labor for most of its troubles, labor blamed management for whatever went wrong, and both of them relegated the Church to the sidelines. But if Dick Smith knew this, he did not show it. Anyway, he had asked for a hard job, and here it was. And he intended to stay.

He began with the children. Soon many of them had the habit of using The Shack for play, and their older brothers and sisters came too. Adults followed. A frightened wife came looking for shelter. Her drunken hus-



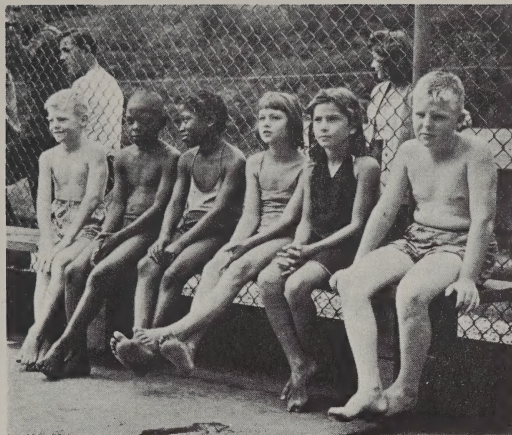
Down into the mine for the day's work, and in spite of danger and difficulty, miners stick to that occupation.

band was dangerous. She came again and again when the man got drunk. But she had no thought of leaving him. "I married him for better or worse. What sort of a wife would I be if I walked out because I'm getting the 'worse' instead of the 'better'?"

There were disasters in the mines, and out of danger and sorrow shared came lasting confidence and friendships. On a winter day, an explosion took place and a fire started in the depths of Pursglove No. 15 mine. The mine foreman and two volunteers went down to try to reach a crew of men in a threatened area. At a point of special danger the foreman went ahead alone to open an airlock to divert the smoke. When he did not return the other two went after him, and met him stumbling toward them, half overcome with smoke and gas. They picked him up and started back toward safety. He ordered them to leave him, and keep their failing strength to get to fresh air themselves. It was the only thing to do. When they came back with help, they found him dead, his small oxygen container completely emptied. Days later, when the fire had burned itself out and it was possible to re-enter the mine, the bodies of the trapped crew were found along a passageway, not far from safety. During those days, up at The Shack, five minutes' walk from the mouth of the mine, wives and families found protection from the cold when their vigil became unendurable. And when hope was entirely gone for the men, still there was the steady upholding of the hope that lies beyond death, the comfort of friendship, the warmth of personal interest.

Community clean-up

The village had other troubles, less tragic than mine disasters. For twenty years or more people had been tossing their garbage out of the back door, or emptying it down the hillside, or at most, using it to feed a few chickens or fertilize a garden. It did not take a hot day at the bottom of the valley to make Dick Smith think



Blonde and dark, swimmers of both races enjoy the Miners' Memorial Pool in common one day a week.

about garbage disposal. He had been thinking about it for a good while. But hot weather brought the moment to put his ideas before other people. The outcome was a three-way arrangement. The mine owners would supply trucks for a camp clean-up, the miners would buy garbage cans and pay for garbage collection, and the missionary would do the promotion and education needed to get the people to do their part.

With Dick Smith, education and action are the same thing. The way to remove trash is to remove trash, and there is no education like seeing somebody do the job. He took a shovel, and handed another to the young theological student who was helping him for the summer. "Well," said the student, "in theological seminary I never learned anything about cleaning up a mining camp, but if that's the way to be a good minister, I'm all for it."

"Pretty, ain't it?" said an old-timer, looking meditatively across the valley. A stranger might see only a few straggly bushes and some coarse grass pushing up through the cinders. But the old-timer saw the greenness where there used to be gray and black varied only by the rust of tin cans and the refuse of years.

Dick Smith got another idea. A swimming pool might help to prove that cleanliness and decent recreation and pride in one's community could have some relation to godliness. The unions took up the idea. So did management. Pursglove Coal Mining Company helped with the gift of a piece of land. By the time the Miners' Memorial Pool was dedicated after the close of the war, the estimated \$30,000 had gone to nearer \$50,000, in money and labor, but it was worth the effort that went into it.

More has come of it than merely recreation. Pursglove has both Negro and white residents. Unions had helped build the pool, and Negroes were members of some of the unions. What about the use of the pool?

Dick Smith said, "White people three days a week; Negroes two; joint use, one." The community reluctantly agreed. Life guards include members of both races. No trouble has resulted. Protests have been made, but the plan was established before the funds were raised, and the protesters are in a small minority. It was that year that the West Virginia Junior Chamber of Commerce gave him one of its annual awards for service to the state.

It spreads

Work such as this cannot be kept in one valley. All around Pursglove are other mining communities with the same religious, social, and intellectual needs that The Shack was helping to meet. Dick Smith began reaching out to them. Students from the nearby state university in Morgantown helped on week-ends. In summer, young people from colleges and theological seminaries spent vacation months in the mining villages. Up a valley is one village that had no bus connections, no church, no recreation excepting a combination movie and beer hall with shows two evenings a week. The student working there for the summer planned an "amateur night" at the school. As he walked up the hill on the big evening, he caught up with two boys of about nine. Each was smoking a cigarette, and each was carrying some onions that had lived too long. "We're aimin' to throw them at the kids in the contest," they confided. By a combination of fast talk and direct action he disarmed them, and the show went on with no more than the normal amount of scuffling and talking.

At first, there was indifference even when there was not hostility. "Your program just can't work, it won't work, it's impossible," protested two officials of one of the largest mining interests in the region. "We know miners. You're wasting your time." But they changed their minds as Dick Smith went steadily on his way. Their company's contributions now run into thousands of dollars, and the individual gifts of the company officials are generous.

The young missionary had been five years on the job when he wrote to his supporting mission board, "We could use nine other year-round centers like The Shack. We on the field make the following proposal: Let the Board of National Missions provide the personnel and pay one-third of the expenses; the owners and operators will pay one-third, and the unions will pay one-third."

To find men to carry out such an assignment is not easy. The miner will not accept leadership merely because it is embodied in someone with a better education than his own. One or two men have come in, found they did not fit, and have left. But the staff is now composed of four full-time, ordained ministers, three part-time librarians, the lifeguards at the Miners' Memorial Pool, two part-time recreation assistants, and volunteer workers up to eighteen or twenty. Mr. Smith estimates that the Mountaineer Mining Mission reaches 20,000 men, women, and children.

The projects are carried on in whatever quarters are available. The Shack itself is reasonably well-equipped. In another community, however, a room 20 x 12 feet, under the company store, served for a group of at least sixty people. An abandoned school building with most of its window-panes broken—below freezing in winter, sunbeaten and hot in summer—served in another neighborhood.

But gradually the housing problem is being solved. The United Mine Workers turned over the use of their hall in one community. In another, the company repaired a school building so that it could be used for mission welfare purposes. In still another, a new church and community center is being put up, with contributions from miners, owners, operators, Negro and white, men and women of many religious denominations.

As the work enlarged, Dick Smith was made director of the entire project, and moved his family to Morgantown, while one of his associates moved into The Shack. His own life is lived pretty largely on the road. This is because the Mountaineer Mining Mission is not static, and its nineteen communities in three counties call for supervision.

Out at a crossroads settlement the young people are holding an evening meeting. Their meeting place is the former mine garage, with its row of great doors shut to make a wall, and a hard-worked juke-box pouring out its melodies. In a corner is a little stand with chocolate bars and pop. The profits go to the work of the local 4-H society. While juke-box and pop lend sociability, a small group withdraws to a corner. They are working out with Dick Smith their plans for an Easter dawn service to be held out of doors, cold though it promises to be. Everyone is ready to do what needs to be done, whether collecting chairs and trucking them up the hillside, or playing the trumpet, or leading in prayer.

In another valley, people are all agog over their new young minister and his wife, and the church that is to be built. It is another mining village, with rows of brick houses climbing the slope on this side, and of wooden houses on that. One of the brick houses, with an apple-tree in its little front yard, has been made the manse. Its four rooms are exactly like those of all the other houses in the row, but fresh wall paper has been hung, pipes brought in, a tiny bathroom contrived, and the luminous pride and happiness on the faces of the neighbors give an extra shine to the new manse and its young residents. Up above the village, on the only level space big enough for it, the new church will soon be rising, to be the home of needed recreation and social life, as well as worship.

Everyone is in it

Dick Smith isn't interested in being the center of any

stage. The first thing he did when he went to Pursglove and got the feel of the situation was to form an advisory council for The Shack. It included county health and educational officers, and a worker from the department of public assistance. It also included union members and coal company officials. The council surveyed the needs of the community and passed their findings on to the county Community Chest. The Shack was voted in as a Community Chest agency. Miners and operators give generously to the Community Chest. The organization in turn pays the operating expense of the Miners' Memorial Pool.

"I well remember the first gift from a local union of the United Mine Workers," Mr. Smith comments. "It was \$15.00. Now the UMW, through individuals and locals, gives several thousand dollars each year. I remember our first contribution from a coal operator—\$25.00. Recently we received \$5,000 from an operator toward a new building in the hills.

"And there has been an even more important advance made in the establishment of our five new churches. I can't name names, but we have men and women, boys and girls, who have been saved in the best Biblical sense of the term. Some who are now church officers were once drunkards. Some who are in church each Sunday once had no concern for the Christian life in any particular. God bless them!"

Richard Smith has no illusions about coal miners as a group. He knows that the circumstances of their lives have made them as unstable as they are generous, as careless as they are courageous. He knows the miners' record in the penal history of the region; he knows, too, their straightforward readiness to give money, help, life itself, in the service of those who need it. He could have left a dozen times, for easier and better paid work. He chooses to stay. Perhaps the reasons that draw him are symbolized in his brief account of the "Old Miners' Christmas" at The Shack. "To this celebration of the Nativity come nearly one hundred old miners each year, representing twenty nationalities, and all the principal branches of the Christian Church. From off the steep hillsides and from up the creeks and hollows of the entire county they make their way toward The Shack. Some are lame, some blind, some crippled, but all manage to appear for the turkey dinner, the Christmas church service, and the substantial food parcels. It is thrilling to hear them sing, many in their own native tongues, 'Silent Night, Holy Night.' It is more thrilling to look into deep-set eyes in wrinkled faces, and to discover there that the flames of hope and love have been kindled anew by the Christ Child. Then, as they move back toward their shanties, it is a joy to detect in their gait a lighter step and a more buoyant spirit. Body and soul have been fed, and life is richer for all—for coal operators, for miners, for churchmen."